Phenomenology of God: Two Ways

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ABSTRACT: The difference between the angelic and anthropic modes of knowledge is total: humans are embodied. Setting to the side Aquinas' irresolvable paradox of the perfect beatitude of the disembodied blessed, the present essay seeks a conception of revelation that takes into full account our contemporary heightened sensitivity to the fundamental conditions of finitude for those of us here below: historicity, materiality, etc. It argues that eschatology is the best approach to take regarding these conditions since it offers them full scope. The suspicion ultimately arises that it is eschatology itself that ultimately grounds them. The essay accomplishes its course in three major steps: (a) reflection on the manner of critique required by this investigation; (b) critique of the dominant trend of the phenomenology of revelation for its sidestepping of the defining conditions of our finitude; (c) proposal of an eschatologically informed phenomenology of revelation. The second and third steps of this course bring into conversation Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste, who become, for our purposes, types of the dominant and proposed approaches, respectively.

At the heart of the thought of the mysterious sixth century author, Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite, is the crystallization of a theme common to the religions that derive from the tradition of Abraham: there are angels and humans. The former are intelligences without earthly bodies, and the latter are intelligences incarnate in earthly bodies; angels and humans therefore contemplate God—the defining creaturely act—in fundamentally different manners.1 Human contemplation, for the Areopagite, requires images, symbols and figures. Even more, the human economy of divine knowledge requires prioritizing the images over the abstract and conceptual, whereas the opposite is the case for angels who know wholly intelligibly. This is for multiple reasons, which include (1) the makeup of human nature (corporeality), (2) the tendency toward making greater idols out of our concepts by equating them with the realities they signify or even simply thinking that their purity and breadth somehow achieve a greater proximity to divine reality, and, finally, (3) because revelation itself makes this prioritization, as Scripture and the liturgy demonstrate. Implicitly, for the Areopagite, we can also add (4) that it is the divine nature that itself requires this prioritization, since images, symbols, and narratives are more adequate to the living and personal nature of ultimate reality than abstract, frozen concepts inevitably drained of the color, vibrancy and intelligible

1 Later, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas’ stages of the process of knowledge (involving sensory encounter with a material thing, abstraction of its spiritual essence, reconnection of the universal essence with the material reality through a “conversio” of the imagination) repeat on a smaller scale in every act of knowing the ‘triplex via’ or three-fold path of the knowledge of God that he inherits from the Areopagite. This is important because it transposes the knowledge of God, now the paradigm of all knowledge, onto the mundane sphere. The exigency of this transposition explains, perhaps, Aquinas’ specific developments of the Areopagite’s three-fold way. I will explore this elsewhere.
density that the figurative dimension retains. The working law for the Areopagite, we could say, is this: the greater the object of the human being’s contemplation, the more symbolic, figurative, and imagistic must the means of his contemplation become. To ascend toward the metaphysically divine, the human must descend all the more into the depths of his materiality. One proceeds from “symbolic” to “mystical” theology as ascetic preparation for Eucharistic practice itself; the noetic “silence” of union in the “dazzling darkness” of God as the eschatological telos of the intellect in no way contradicts Eucharistic liturgical encounter with God through the “flesh” of Jesus; the progress of Dionysian “theologies” is a deepening and intensification of the humanity of man in union with the divinity of God.

In what follows, I sketch some fundamental aspects of a phenomenology of revelation that takes as seriously as we can—following the tradition of the Areopagite—the humanity of our contemplation of God in some of its most essential modes: our materiality, our finitude, our historicity, and our fallenness. I offer a discussion of the phenomenology of revelation in two parts: first, a critique of the phenomenology of revelation in its current, or rather dominant state; second, a modest or open-ended proposal for a phenomenology of God that transposes the basic categories of eschatology into a ‘philosophy of revelation.’ To perform this critique and to make this proposal, I contrast the philosophical projects of Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste, considering them as images or types of distinct manners of approaching the complex phenomenon of Christian revelation. The criterion of discernment is provided by the Abrahamic question with which I began: what image or type of the phenomenology of revelation is more human, which expresses most fully the human element within our reception of divine revelation?

I. Fallenness and Critique

First, concerning the fallen will, the task is to give it its universal due and also to set it aside without forgetting it if we can. Second, regarding the nature of critique, we will offer an

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2 Aquinas’ ‘conversio ad phantasmata’ repeats and universalizes this specific kind of priority of the image over the concept for all human knowledge The ultimate object of angelic and human knowledge is, of course, the same, intelligible reality—indeed, hyper-intelligible reality—but the human requires the mediation of the material domain and in this way actually reaches, paradoxically, levels of transcendence that the ‘immediacy’ of angelic knowledge cannot attain.

3 Parisian philosopher Jean Wahl expressed this simultaneity of transcendence as upward movement exteriorly, which is elicited by the other, and also as a drive inwards towards interiority. In Levinas, the simultaneity of this double movement, of transascendence and transdescendence, is found in that the relation to an alterity that can never be reached becomes the condition of the possibility of the interior selfhood of the ‘subject’ itself. In Henry, it is the opposite: the autoaffected interiority of the self is the condition for the construction of a movement outside of the self. For Wahl this duality is irreducible in both directions, for one side is incomprehensible without the other. See Jean Wahl, Existence humaine et transcendance (1944).

4 This is a highly self-circumscribed presentation of these thinkers’ philosophies, which are not considered in themselves. We will also have to set the deduction of the ultimate complementarity of these two approaches to the side in this essay, though its lines would perhaps not be difficult to draw, since they represent more or less two dimensions perennially present in the dialectic of the Christian tradition.
intellectual mode of engagement that forms a substantial part of this paper. (1) Fallen human nature and the limitations of finitude. Concerning the philosophical task we have given ourselves here, what is fallenness, and what are its basic implications? Distinct though inseparable from materiality and historicity, the essential components of our finitude, fallenness is the peculiar darkness of mind resulting from a self-interested will. It is the perennial wild-card, throwing a wrench into any chain of reasoning and disrupting any progress of knowledge that we humans build. Fallenness is our finitude, good in itself become tragic precisely by closing in upon itself and attempting a radical self-justification and self-creation. Augustine laments about humans that “what they love they want to be the truth.”

Our primary attitude is to delight in the truth that shines and pleases (shining for us), but to repulse the truth that accuses and calls us to account (shining on us). Commenting on this passage in Augustine, the young Heidegger says that “they love [the truth] when it encounters them as glitzy, in order to enjoy it aesthetically, in all convenience, just as they enjoy every glamour that, in captivating, relaxes them. But they hate it when it presses them forcefully. When it concerns them themselves, and when it shakes them up and questions their own facticity and existence, then it is better to close one’s eyes just in time, in order to be enthused by the choir’s litanies which one has staged for oneself.” Despite this wrench, this thorn thrust into our human nature, we must continue to think and to labor with the hope that what we build is not totally built in vain, for in this Augustinian vision, the truth always has two edges, one of which indeed cuts us and which, in our revulsion from it, veils the truth. Even though “the truth remains concealed to us,” says Heidegger, we “do not remain concealed before” the truth. The acknowledgement of this double-edge of truth requires a specific attitude that defines a truthful approach to the truth. Part of this attitude is an essential recognition of the vanity of what we say, that the truth is not our possession. This recognition gives us a freedom for the truth, a freedom that leaves the judgment of what is good in our work to Another who can and will judge absolutely. All our thinking must therefore be conscious of itself before the eschaton (coram novissimos: before the new things); its appropriate freedom is rooted in this recognition of itself in the light of an absolute judgment that is not its to give, which is a recognition born out of a love for the truth.

5 “Sin is that which removes the possibility of grounding, and, therefore, explanation, i.e., the possibility of reasonableness. In the chase after sinful rationalism, the consciousness is deprived of the reason inherent in all being. Because of over-intellectualization, the consciousness ceases to see intelligently. Sin itself is something wholly rational. It is wholly according to the measure of rationality. It is rationality in rationality, or devilry, for the Devil-Mephistopheles is naked rationality” (Pavel Florensky, The Pillar and Ground of the Truth, trans. Boris Jakim, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1997, 133). For a profound meditation on the “dark face” of creation in the fall of man, its depravity and demonic self-absorption, see Sergei Bulgakov, The Lamb of God, trans. Boris Jakim. (Eerdmans, 2008), 149-56.


7 Amant eam lucentem, oderun eam redarguentem: “They love the truth when it enlightens them, but hate it when it reprehends them.” Augustine, Confessions, X, 23, 34; Heidegger discusses this text in “Augustinianism and Neoplatonism,” §10 c, Phenomenology of Religious Life, 147-8.


9 Ibid.
in itself, in its essential transcendence from us and our nakedness before it. Fallenness, our revulsion from the truth, can be transformed by an attitude of truthfulness that is oriented to the truth by acknowledging that what I possess is not the truth in itself. I, in my open nakedness before the truth, stand before a final truth to come, a final truth which indeed already impinges on the present, but in the first place on me first as my judge. Finally, then, the truthful attitude acknowledges that the content of the truth as judgment and as shining has not yet completely arrived. This leads directly to my second transitional comment. (2)

Critique. What is critique? Critique is essentially problematic, for it seems to require always a counter-critique. It is not absolute, even though it tends to assert itself by its very critical nature as absolute, as a divine or quasi-divine ability to see the wrong in light of an intuition of the right. Every critique, every critical attitude, tends toward its own impossible realization as the truth.

Yet there are two degrees of critique. On the one hand, the enactment of critique itself enacts a veiling reduction of that which it examines: a thought, a system, or a philosophy that names things and describes them, that seeks intelligibility understanding. Critique, by its very nature, turns something that is living into something that reifies; critique determines and conceptualizes objects. At this level, critique requires a distance from its object of inquiry and freezes its object into a stasis. Critique, in order to discern the reifying nature of a system of thought, must already reify that system of thought. By its essentially distorting approach, therefore, the stance of critique inevitably contains that which it accuses its object to be.

On the other hand, the second level of critique is much more reserved and cognizant of its own essential limitations. Here, critique is that mode of thought which brings to our attention the conceptual reduction of reality that any thought, system, or philosophy entails—or at least to which it tends when it establishes itself as a workable thought, system or philosophy. Not only do the words we write take on a life of their own, containing implications that we ourselves could never see, but they also tend to propose themselves over time through a history of their reception (Wirkungsgeschichte). They propose themselves as equal with, or sufficient to, the realities to which they only refer in the moment of their first gestation and, at best, vaguely talk about. Our words tend to crystallize and assert a substantiality and reality about themselves that their own nature as words does not and cannot possess in itself. Critique acknowledges this and refuses the rest that a narrative, system, theory, or idea proposes, and it attempts to break up our reifying language. Critique keeps us on pilgrimage. Here, with this second definition of critique, we are far from some ultimately irrational autonomy and closer to that which we ought to retain, I suggest, from the philosophy of deconstruction. Like deconstruction, this kind of critique recognizes itself before the eschatological, the “last word” which is the end of critique, but not only in the abstract but perfectly normative sense that the last word belongs to God alone. Unlike deconstruction, it confesses that this last word can be spoken and has truly taken on shape for us in revelation, even in the midst of history and its delimiting conditions. In this latter case, however, let us not forget: this ultimate form of truth is precisely formless—the empty tomb. In the half-light of Easter morning, critique finds its meta-origin and an ever-greater counter-critique. In the first place, Easter, the Victory of God and his definitive work in history, is a blank spot, a

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10 This is a thesis of Stanislas Breton, developed in Théorie des idéologies et la réponse de la foi.
vacuum, a critique of all of our triumphalisms. It is as if to make sure we would learn the
lesson of the Cross.\textsuperscript{11} Most importantly, this meta-critique, the origin of critique, finds its
place within the logic of a \textit{promise}, an eschatology detached from which critique—as is the
case in deconstruction, I would argue—becomes absolute, a god-like, autonomous reason, an
iron law of historical reason to which even God must submit. Eschatology is the two-edged
sword of truth from which all critique comes; the dark gaping entrance to the tomb of Christ
is the un-sealable wound of history, of language, and of reason. This sword is simply not in
our hands, even though in every act of thought and will we find ourselves wounded from it
by virtue of our faith that perpetually lives from the wound of this promise.

II. Critique: the Ambivalence of the Phenomenology of Revelation

With this sense of critique—critique in its lesser mode and the openness to truth
obtained by the recognition of its dispossession of ourselves before it—let us begin to
acknowledge the ambivalence of the phenomenology of revelation in its present state.

In order to establish a valid criticism of the phenomenology of revelation, we must
first observe its challenge, and, in the second place, be challenged by it. The advance of
phenomenology in its conception of revelation is found in its demolition of the \textit{a priori} and
its absolutization of the affirmation of absolute alterity, an alterity that has the power to make
itself truly known. In this way, phenomenology has found a way to conceive of revelation
that challenges us, before which we can only stand with open hands and see what it gives,
even finding ourselves inscribed within its gift. The truth that shines first shines from itself
and shines on us. From it—and thus not from a preconceived sketch of ourselves, especially
our conditions of experience and knowledge—we can come to see what we are. Here, the
phenomenon of revelation is allowed its fullest scope; its horizon of possibility is found
nowhere but in it itself and from itself. If God is \textit{God}, then to acknowledge anything less—to
require God, for example, to submit to specific limitations and requirements in advance, even
those determined by the receiver—would be, or at least could be, idolatry of a pernicious sort.
The \textit{a priori} conditions of the phenomenon of revelation—that is, of its appearing and hence
our experience of it—can only be articulated \textit{after} the phenomenon is given and from the
phenomenon itself, which, we may find, resets the entire field of experience in general and in
a completely new way. For this phenomenology, revelation articulates \textit{itself}; it even
articulates its conditions for its perception and its knowledge. It gives its own horizons.\textsuperscript{12}

The alternative philosophy of revelation is the philosophy that determines the
conditions of divine appearing in advance by reasoning, for example, from a conception of
basic human structures like reason or from a preconceived sketch of the structures of human
language. This view says, “God \textit{cannot} do this” or “God \textit{cannot} manifest himself in that

\textsuperscript{11} On this see Stanislas Breton’s interview with Richard Kearney, appended to the English translation
of \textit{The Word and the Cross}, 137.

Here the saturated phenomenon is “absolute”—that is, “without analogy” to anything in previous
experience—and therefore “depends on no horizon.” Marion calls it, therefore, an “unconditioned
phenomenon.”
way” because the fundamental structure of human reason or language legislates against its possibility. This alternative which the phenomenology of revelation critiques is what Jean-Luc Marion calls “metaphysics.” For him, metaphysics is, in the first place, any legislation of the possible before we get to what appears and manifests its own possibility. Second, it is any definition of the human that is determined by this transcendental account of experience and reason. To think from the event of manifestation—the original givenness of the phenomenon—means that we arrive to the conditions for its appearing only \textit{a posteriori}.

According to Marion, phenomenology discerns the common rationality shared by all phenomena. There is a phenomenality as such, which is normatively governed by the concept of the event and which conceives the phenomenon as its own origin. It is simply what it gives itself to be, and its perceptibility, thinkability, and possibility comes from itself in its appearing. Revelation in particular is the paradigm case of the phenomenon—paradigm \textit{because} it proposes itself as the most radical phenomenon possible, and paradigm \textit{in the sense that} it determines our concept of the phenomenon in general and becomes the reference point for our understanding of any phenomenon whatsoever. Revelation, therefore, is central to philosophy because it is the absolute phenomenon, the phenomenon par excellence by relation to which every possible and actual phenomenon is thought. The event of revelation, and the conception of the phenomenon that it provides, therefore demands that we raise impossibility above possibility, for the impossible—that which undoes every preconception, every limit put in place to secure the rationality of what appears in advance, limits which are undone by the appearing—is determinative of the very meaning of humanity and of human reason itself.\textsuperscript{13} Marion summarizes this challenge of the phenomenology of revelation when he declares in a recent debate with Jean-Luc Nancy that “there is no outside of the Christological question,” a question which establishes itself with all concreteness in the question Jesus posed to his disciples: “But what about you? Who do you say that I am? [Mk. 8:29]”\textsuperscript{14} This is the question that the phenomenon of revelation poses to us: in being the human revelation of God par excellence, in identifying himself in history with the God of Israel, the God who is coming, Jesus of Nazareth places before us God’s definitive word, a question to which we must give an answer. The human question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?,” is one with God’s question, “Who, O mortal, are you?”

\textit{The Question}

The question we must raise, precisely by virtue of our acknowledgement of the advance of phenomenology in our conception of revelation—an advance beyond any \textit{a priori} transcendentalism, any subjective, existential or linguistic legislation of possibility that constrains and delimits the appearing of revelation—is the question of \textit{whether this advance has overshot the mark}. Is the demolition of every \textit{a priori} conception of the conditions or limits of the experience and rationality of revelation, even those determinative of our finitude (our historicity and our flesh, particularly)—is this demolition the same as \textit{disregarding the

\textsuperscript{13} See \textit{Certitudes négatives}, conclusion.

fact of these very conditions themselves? Theology offers the philosophy of revelation a principle that could help here and may be required: that of nature and grace. Grace does not destroy nature, but it judges, heals, and perfects it. However paradoxically related, grace and nature are not reducible to one another, and any understanding of their relation implies the eschatological situation of our thinking, a situation which precludes us from considering that the revelation of God in history would not be subject to historical conditions.

This introduction of the eschatological allows us to reset the question: is the reduction to givenness—the refusal or demolition of every a priori, the rejection of any analogy vis-à-vis the event of revelation—is this an ideal or a phenomenological reality? We can ask more particularly: is it enough to suggest that these conditioning elements of creaturely experience and knowledge are saturated and set spinning, even unhinged or deconstructed, by the event of revelation? Marion is ambivalent: for him the anthropological categories that revelation saturates are provided generally by Kant, and yet, at the same time, revelation is said to give its own conditions. L’adonné, the receiver akin to the Platonic “receptacle” (chôra), is a “blank screen onto which the phenomenon crashes.”15 His fundamental distinction between givenness and appearing, according to which givenness is invisible and all that is given does not appear even though all that appears is given,16 seems to me to require a radical reserve about the meaning of the appearances themselves, even if and especially because it establishes their truthfulness.17 Finally, corollary to this reserve, it seems to require an eschatology to resolve the tension between these two components of phenomenality, for the reserve of the given points to the provisional nature of manifestation.18 Perhaps it is the case that, at the very least, “excess” or “reserve” is a hermeneutical decision with which we begin. Because of the inadequacy of our concepts before the given, is an endless hermeneutic of response enough here? Does saturation tell the definitive story of the Christian concept of revelation? One doubts it. I doubt it because, in this context, the argument asserts itself that the reserve of the given is more prominent in Christianity, even particularly in Christ—in the kenôsis of God and in the emptiness of the tomb, an emptiness which the post-resurrection appearances only make agonizingly more apparent [noli me tangere] and an emptiness which corresponds, markedly, to the utter poverty intrinsic to faith. That is to say, the absence of the

15 Being Given, 265: “Only the impact of what gives itself brings about its arising, with one and the same shock, of the flash with which its first visibility bursts and the very screen on which it crashes...” Shane Mackinlay, (Interpreting Excess. NY: Fordham, 2009), highlights, for us this ambivalence by arguing that Marion’s conception of saturated phenomena implies an “active reception,” a hermeneutical moment which is always already in play.

16 “The given, issued from the process of givenness, appears but leaves concealed givenness itself, which becomes enigmatic” (Being Given, 68).

17 “[T]he appearing...gives that which appears” (Being Given, 52); that is to say, the concept of givenness gives, or rather marks, phenomenology’s access to the transcendent “thing itself,” transcendence within immanence without constricting transcendence to the contents of consciousness, as in Husserl.

presence of faith’s divine object, in the radical lack of any saturation at all in our normative, historical experience of God. All this is symbolized well, at the center and apex of Christian faith, in the unleavened, tasteless Eucharistic host: a flat, colorless circle, a blank placeholder for the glory of God...a promise that wounds us.

To restate the problem: this phenomenology of revelation (portrayed a little unfairly as a type), although essentially challenging the a priori character that at least relatively defines our finitude, still thinks as if revelation were already completely given, as if it were not given as to come. The challenge of revelation itself to the phenomenology of revelation (and to any approach to revelation) is precisely that revelation, at least in the context of human history and finite, material experience, keeps in play the normative conditions of finitude even if it radicalizes them to the point of establishing them, as if for the first time, precisely in its very act of revelation. The better we understand these conditions—and particularly the way in which they are tied to revelation—the better we understand revelation itself, in its essential eschatological conditions which do nothing less than take hold of, build upon, and perfect our normative human conditions—albeit as their master.

III. Proposal: Eschatological Finitude and the Phenomenology of Revelation

We must take with equal seriousness the challenge of phenomenology to our conception of revelation, inasmuch as it calls into question the transcendental account of the conditions of our finitude—that is, the static, a priori account. We must also take seriously the challenge that revelation proposes to the phenomenology of revelation inasmuch as it discloses and puts in play the conditions of our finitude—our historicity and materiality—seemingly by magnifying them. In revealing the conditions of our finitude as if for the first time, revelation reveals that the conditions of our finitude are plastic, that our finitude itself is open-ended and a divine project. Part of this open-endedness of our finitude is found in the way that it can be the locus of the impossible. The conditions that our finitude cannot help raising up, vis-à-vis the divine self-manifestation, can become the site of the divine appearing that remains divine, that reveals itself as divine and indeed all the more divine in appearing as divine within the sphere of creaturely expression and understanding. Yet we cannot stop there, and we cannot stop there because we cannot start just there. The phenomenology of revelation that deconstructs our transcendental accounts of revelation—specifically the static, transcendental accounts of reason that constrain, in whatever manner, the phenomenality of revelation, any metaphysics—must themselves be chastised, tempered. Phenomenology, even as the description of the phenomenality of revelation as such, does not contain the Absolute; revelation is not identified with our reception of it and much less with our descriptions of its phenomenal structure, just as no reality is simply the words by which we refer to it, approach it, or understand it.

The eschatological imposes itself. We must acknowledge the reserve of the given. To refuse the reserve of the given would be to collapse the eschatological tension that defines Christian revelation, and we would have to call it an “over-realized phenomenology” of revelation. Grace would swallow up nature, eternity, history, and heaven and earth, but for Christianity, we are certainly not there yet. Further, at least for Christian orthodoxy, eternal
life is not disembodied bliss, but the transfiguration of all things according to the standard of Christ’s resurrected body, about which we only know very little (witness the Gospels), and in relation to which all we know is by reference to our present historical categories, the integrity of which it somehow retains but essentially surpasses.

The basic question, then, concerns the way that revelation puts our finite conditions in play. I propose that eschatology provides the answers to this question and that what is needed is an eschatological way of thinking this question. Our finite conditions are plastic and ultimately given as to come; they are themselves provisional. How do we think this way?

The Logic of the Promise

To introduce the way of thinking eschatologically—the horizon within which the Christian revelation proposes itself—I turn from Marion to our second ‘type’ of the phenomenology of revelation, particularly Jean-Yves Lacoste’s critical elucidation of the phenomenality of givenness in the closing section of his essay “De la donation comme promesse,” the 7th study of his 2008 volume La phénoménalité de Dieu.19 In this subtle investigation, Lacoste ruminates on the significance of the “linguistic ubiquity” of the language of givenness: the gift and the given (159). He asks the fundamental question of whether saying “being” is “given” is not ruled by a “naive anthropomorphism” (159): does being given imply a giver from whom being is a gift? Ought reality be understood fundamentally according to the logic of a mundane human economy of exchange? This critical starting point—one as old, perhaps, as philosophy itself—leads Lacoste (in generalities similar to Marion at this point) to an understanding of phenomenological givenness according to the phenomenality of the event, a linkage which “separates the concept and event of donation from any anthropological measure” (159-60). This journey leads, in the end, to a theological conclusion concerned with the given par excellence, the given that is given only as promised, and, thus, the definitive eradication of realized eschatology from our phenomenology of revelation. This is the precise point where our two types distinguish themselves, and it completely colors their phenomenologies. Lacoste’s theological conclusion is governed by the classical theological-philosophical question: to what extent can the Absolute be given to us? If God is infinite and a completely unbounded personality, can he reveal? Can he truly communicate himself to us, essentially finite and bounded creatures that we are? The classical question raised by the phenomenon of revelation requires a level-headed turn to the classical tradition. Here, Lacoste observes in the first place that to say that a finite creature like us is capable of the infinite (finitum capax infiniti) is to assert the theologically primitive thesis that the infinite can infinitely give itself. The gift of divine revelation to the finite creature “by definition” is itself boundless, an “infinite gift” (175). The precise Latin definition of eschatological bliss, formulated in the 14th century as the “face to face vision of the divine essence,” suggests no more in reality, observes Lacoste, than the vision’s necessarily “inchoate” character: the absolute giving of the Absolute is itself tied to an infinitely non-given, even if this non-given is itself given as non-given.

Eschatology—in other words, the horizon of Christian revelation—is ruled by a certain logic:

19 159-77, esp. 174-7.
Here we must affirm that the infinite can be truly given, if ever only in a finite mode. In Aquinas, for example, the beatific vision is given through the mediation of the light of glory (lumen gloria), which is a created light that adapts the creature to the vision of the uncreated essence, a vision that is for the creature inexhaustible. This distinction runs parallel with the Eastern one between essence and energies; the latter, though uncreated, are what the creature participates in by grace and not the former.

For Lacoste, the play of seeing and not-seeing that constitutes the vision contains both the knowledge that there is always more to know of God in eternity and that God can be truly known by us. Together they make up the double source of human blessedness. Needless to say, the infinitely exhaustive givenness of God, even and especially in the beatific vision, is a “strict impossibility” and ought to be distinguished from a mere “practical impossibility” of adequate perception, as if it were potentially realizable (175). It is a “practical impossibility” for a created intelligence, in the human mode, to perceive all the sides of a cube at once by virtue of our embodied limitations. This is not the case, it seems, for created intelligence as such, since it could be possible for the angel, unconditioned by material limitations, to perceive the cube, at least in its intelligibility, in its totality. Yet, it is a “strict impossibility” for the angel or the human to know God exhaustively, whether in this world or the next. The incomplete character of the divine givenness to a finite intuition is permanent and defining of the relation, and it is as much a source of beatitude as the truthfulness of the infinite self-communication. Happiness is partly found in knowing that we cannot exhaust God, that there is infinitely more to know even when we know him truly. Indeed, true knowledge of God knows God as ever-greater than our reception of him, ad infinitum.

The fundamental division between finitude and infinitude that remains central here for Lacoste highlights the essential continuity between the state of viator and comprehensor, between the state of pilgrimage within the horizon of the world and that of being installed in the homeland of eternal beatitude. However, the difference between these two fundamental human states remains stark: God is given to human intuition in himself only on the other side of death. On this side, in the world, God is not seen at all. “If one still wants to utilize the language of vision,” Lacoste states, “then the appearance of God in the world is conditioned by a fundamental lack of intuition” (175). Hence, “donation,” he says, “gives only in order

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20 See Denzinger, 530. From Benedict XII “Benedictus Deus” (29 Jan 1366): “...have seen and see the divine essence by intuitive vision, and even face to face, with no mediating creature, serving in the capacity of an object seen, but divine essence immediately revealing itself, plainly, clearly and openly to them...”

21 For Aquinas, the comprehensor, as far as beatitude goes, means not “the inclusion of the comprehended in the comprehensor,” since “whatever is comprehended [in this way] by a finite creature is itself [merely] finite.” Rather, “comprehension means nothing but the holding of something already present and possessed: thus one who runs after another is said to comprehend him when he lays hold of him” (ST I-II, q. 4, a. 3, rep. 1). Comprehension in the beatific vision, therefore, means being finally present to the One that we seek, not exhaustively grasping his essence, which is impossible. For Aquinas, every revelation of God wholly reveals him but not fully, which is impossible given that God can only be exhaustively known by himself and we are only granted a share in that knowledge according to the maximum of our finite capabilities, which are themselves only known a posteriori, and therefore, in revelation, remain the most fully secured compared to any other act of knowledge.
to be believed” (176). The scope of human intuition in the world deals always with the visible domain. This visible—for example, the body of Jesus Christ, whether the Eucharistic or, for the original disciples, his historical body—is, “perceivable as God giving himself only on the condition that we make a distinction between what is given to sensible intuition and what is given to a believing intuition” (176, emphasis added). Yet, at the same time, if we separate these things in order to consider the visibly given only in itself apart from faith, all we get is the visible and nothing more. The resurrected Christ is strictly invisible to sensible intuition and perceivable only by faith. Thus, in the concrete revelation of God in the body and normatively in the Eucharist, “the gift that we perceive possesses only promissory value and ought not be taken as a final word [dernier mot]” (176). This difficult situation, definitive of eschatological faith, means for Lacoste that the gift that is given in divine revelation is perceived only as a promise, as yet to be given but pledged to be given.

The formula that Lacoste derives from the eschatological situation of divine revelation is the following: Dieu jamais donné, “God (n)ever given” (176). God, as Absolute, has the right and power to reveal himself as he is—that is, in truth. To see Jesus is to see the Father, as the Scriptures teach, yet the divine gift of revelation is therefore less one of saturation (rassasiement) than it is that of anticipation, of trust in that which is given as promise (176). Finally, the promise already includes within its logic that the promised, when it arrives, will not ever be exhaustible by the creaturely gaze, and thereby it is something from which the infinite hunger of creaturely desire would move on to disappointment. In this way, that which is given in historical revelation is truly given; this always-more character of divine revelation is shared in the present and future state. That which is given is still given in the mode of promised-to-come even when the conditions of historical finitude are absorbed and fully metamorphosed in the “world to come.” We could express this historical knowledge in Christ from a different source. Newman in the Apologia remarks, “The visible world still remains without its divine interpretation; Holy Church in her sacraments and her hierarchical appointments, will remain, even to the end of the world, after all but a symbol of those heavenly facts that fill eternity. Her mysteries are but the expressions in human language of truths to which the human mind is unequal.”

We realize here that it is of the nature of God to ever-transcend his self-giving, and that to give himself in that way is to give himself truly. God transcends his revelation in history, at least normatively, by way of eschatological reserve. This ever-greater character of revelation is a result of the fact that God is not an abstract concept or a logic of relations among concepts, but a Living Person, and even personal in the perfect, three-fold excess of himself as tri-hypostatic personality. When we articulate the truth of God within the conditions of finitude—for example, reciting the Creed, or more abstractly the formula of the Trinity), or when we address or invoke God as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or when we, through the Spirit, make the sacred offering of Jesus’ living flesh on the altar of the Father—there we are knowing God, in the gifts. Our knowledge is coincident with the act of worship. Here, we know that the concrete particularity of the bare words (in the case of the formula), of the prayer (in the case of raising one’s mind to God), or of the act (in the case of the Eucharistic sacrifice), express the unfathomable reality of God in degrees of intensity—in a

22 Apologia pro vita sua, 18.
way more, and more, and most fitting for the divine as humanly possible, if also more, and more, and most provisionally and, finally, with more, and more, and most eschatological reserve. We can give an aphoristic face to this with a quote from Louis Bouyer. Here, knowledge is “always renewing itself in the measure that it deepens itself,”\textsuperscript{23} but let us immediately add the proviso that as far as God is concerned, the deepening of knowledge includes the deepening awareness of the mystery, of the transcendence of the gift, and it is thereby true knowledge.

The divine gift infinitely transcends the gift itself, and the gift, in order to be truly given, can and must give to us the recognition that that which is given—in the case of Christ, God himself in Person—infinity transcends the gift, and this precisely because he is the gift. Hence the gift of the Father in Christ is never past tense “given” but only given as to come. In this way, the gift truly is given to us in the present without deceiving us. In the case of God, then, the gift is a pledge.

Faith is the knowledge of the One in Christ to whom we are pledged, and it is therefore to willingly pledge oneself to him without reserve—that is, in direct proportion to the degree of his pledge to us (which is itself without reserve, in the Cross). And yet, the absolute nature of this mutual self-giving is inseparable from a reserve that is not just historical—even if revelation only makes more evident and more drastic the lines that mark our finite historicity. It is a reserve that is founded on the recognition of the promissory nature of the gift, and it is a refusal to close in advance the limits of the gift, particularly by reducing what is given to the scope of our present capacity to receive it (which could, after all, be a danger in the phenomenological “way of excess” since the phenomenality of revelation is conceived as given and hence the possession of the perceiver). The “way of promise,” however, enacts the experience of human conditions in their fragile, earthly mortality as a fundamental matter of revelation.

After all, it is the consummation of a marriage that makes it valid, and nothing less.

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\textsuperscript{23} See Louis Bouyer’s “biblical and Eucharistic” view of the Trinity in \textit{The Invisible Father}, trans. Hugh Gilbert, OSB. Petersham, MA: Saint Bede, 1998, 230-3. This quotation comes from his analysis of the nature of the “progressive” revelation of God in the history of Israel of which the revelation of Jesus Christ is in direct continuity; 142.